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A FRIENDSHIP AND ITS FRUITS

The literature of the nineteenth century more than that of any other literary period, touched perfectly every phase of human experience and sympathy. Musicians tell us that the great masters have covered every possible combination of harmonics, and, in quite the same way, carrying the idea across into the field of letters, it would seem not difficult of proof that this is true of the writers of the later Georgian and entire Victorian eras. It would appear, too, as the student looks more closely into the causes of this highly perfected and wide expression of written thought, that one contributing agency, not the least potent, was the warm fellow-feeling and intellectual sympathy exhibited in many instances, and it is easy to see how an intercommunion based on this could produce just what was produced—a living atmosphere in books.

For instance, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen enjoyed the admiration and friendship of Sir Walter Scott, the latter even acknowledging that to Miss Edgeworth's description of Irish character and manners he was indebted for the inspiration which led him to attempt and carry out, to the undying delight of readers, the delineation of Scottish life and character in the *Waverley Novels*. Sir Walter also repeatedly acknowledged the admiration he had for the skilful creator of Collins, Bennet, and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. There is no doubt that the intimate association of Leigh Hunt, Keats, and Shelley contributed greatly to the work of each, for it is well known that the peculiarly musical versification in Hunt's *Rimini* strongly influenced the subsequent poetry of both his friends. Yet further confirmation of this idea lies in the ideal intellectual sympathy which existed between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, consummated at last in a "marriage of the poets", and in the fact that, from a score of points, they played an important part in the life of Tennyson.

The whole civilized world, however, is this year thinking especially of that great master player on the gamut of humanities, Charles Dickens, and it comes with particular appropriateness

to speak of anything or anybody close to him. His friendships were many, but, though he had fellowship with Carlyle, Hunt, Macaulay, Sidney Smith, and most of the great writers of his day, the connection which seems, next to that with Forster, to have produced the most positive and lasting expression of mutual esteem, sympathy, and help, was the one formed with a kindly, bespectacled little man, with black hair and beard and large white forehead, owning a name now known far and wide among the lovers of books — Wilkie Collins.

They came together in 1851, when Collins was twenty-six and Dickens forty, and they remained together until death parted them; the ties of friendship being in time even more closely knit by the marriage of Charles Collins, brother of the younger of the associates, and his senior's daughter. At this period "Boz" was at the height of his reputation, having produced *Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Christmas Carol*, *Dombey and Son*, and *David Copperfield*. The other was comparatively unknown in the literary world, for the total of his work was summed up in a life of his father, William, the landscape painter; *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome*, a classic romance of the fifth century, which fell rather flat; and *Rambles beyond Railways, or Notes in Cornwall*. Collins's early life had been influenced by the cultured and artistic tastes of his father, and of his god-father, David Wilkie, the noted Scotch artist, and, whilst the refinement and mental charm due to this undoubtedly appealed to the elder of the friends, it is fair to assume that what first attracted the big-hearted Dickens were the early uncertainties and struggles which Collins had encountered. The former saw in these a similarity to his own youth, and the sympathy thus begotten paved the way to a discovery of many things in common. For the author of *Pickwick* had tried law and parliamentary reporting before he settled down to writing, and the future author of *The Moonstone* was an articled clerk in a city tea house, and afterwards (to please his father, who was opposed to the profession of letters) was entered at Lincoln's Inn, being in due time admitted to the bar, although he never practised.

Both had the dramatic instinct and both loved the theatre. Dickens, indeed, would have become a professional actor had he not obtained employment as a reporter before arrangements with the manager of Covent Garden could be consummated. Early in the intimacy of the two, they were found in amateur theatricals at Tavistock House and elsewhere, and Collins wrote two melodramas for the performances, *The Light House* and *The Frozen Deep*, the latter ultimately finding its way to the public stage. But all this is not enough to account for the inception of an intimacy between two men of strong distinctive individualities. It is necessary to dig deeper and find what influences breathed into it the fervor which induced Dickens to invite his younger friend to join him in editing *Household Words* (afterwards *All the Year Round*) and writing for it, to send him countless letters brimming over with suggestions and praise, to join him in journeys abroad and in "sprees" to the theatre at home, and to collaborate with him, as late as '67, in producing the interesting and strongly marked *No Thoroughfare*, afterwards dramatized and produced.

One finds, in studying carefully the works of these two novelists, that the influences referred to lay in what may be called an intellectual mutuality. The one had marked gifts of conception and execution which the other lacked. It is conceded that Collins gave a new turn and direction to the method and coloring of Dickens's work from *Bleak House* to *Edwin Drood*, and it is equally clear that the former grew steadily under the domination of the Dickensian dramatic force and humor from his earliest serious novel *Basil* to the consummation of his artistry in *The Moonstone*. This is said of both, however, with the distinct reservation that, in this helpful association, neither lost anything of his originality as a writer.

Dickens was a genius, not only in humor, but in sentiment. He idealized humor and virtue and excoriated vice. Therefore, up to the writing of *Bleak House*, and with the exception probably of *Edith Dombey*, his people impress one more as lively embodiments of abstract qualities and emotions, contributing to a well-defined and easily felt atmosphere of the emotions, than as fully rounded out men and women. Pecksniff,

Carker, Sykes, Fagan, and Quilp appeal to the reader as noxious influences, and Pickwick, Dick Swiveller, Sam Weller, Little Nell, Captain Cuttle, and the Cheeryble brothers as the good influences of humor, pathos, and virtue. His picture of an inn, for example, shows this extraordinary skill for creating atmosphere. Nobody has ever felt how much real good he could get in "the lounge" of a country "pub," beside a warm stove with a hot drink handy, until he has read *The Pickwick Papers* and *Barnaby Rudge* and has sat down in "The White Hart," "The Magpie and Stump," or "The Maypole" along with the jolly, odd creatures inspired by this great believer in the potentiality of kindness, fellowship, and good cheer.

But as *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, appeared, between 1853 and 1865, a marked tendency toward individualization was observed, and a further disposition to concentrate effects in a succession of skilfully arranged scenes. Such were the great word duel between Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock in the turret room at Chesney Wold, the scene between Sidney Carton and Lucy Manette in the early part of *The Tale of Two Cities*, that between Carton and Darnay in the French prison, and the very great picture at the scaffold. In *Great Expectations*, too, there is that magnificently human drama in the passage between the ghostly Miss Havisham,—a veritable "Woman in White," dressed in her faded bridal finery, reminiscent of a heart long broken,—and Pips and Estrella.

The man who has been credited with thus helping to bring out more fully the powers of his great contemporary has been subject to various criticisms in his own work. Shortly after his death a writer in the *Spectator* gave this clever summary of it: "He was a literary chess-player of the first force, with power of carrying his plan right through the game and making every move tell. His method was to introduce a certain number of characters, set before them a well-defined object, such as the discovery of a secret, the revindication of a fortune, the tracking of a crime, or the establishment of a doubted marriage, and then bring in other characters to resist or counteract their efforts. Each side makes moves, almost invariably good; the

interest goes on accumulating till the looker-on—the reader is always placed in that attitude—is rapt out of himself by strained attention; and then there is a sudden and totally unexpected mate. It is chess which is being played; and in the best of all his stories, the one which will live for years, *The Moonstone*, the pretense that it is anything else is openly disregarded." Charles Reade placed Collins next to Dickens and said of him: "An artist of the pen; there are terribly few among writers." Mrs. Oliphant's judgment was that "He was an artist of plot. He did not possess the still more interesting and far higher gift of creation. There is no character, no living being in his works with the exception perhaps of Count Fosco." Swinburne said: "It is apparently the general opinion, an opinion which seems to me incontestable, that no third book of their author's can be ranked as equal with *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, two works of not more indisputable than incomparable ability. *No Name* is an only less excellent example of as curious and original talent."

Whilst it is true that Collins is a master in plot construction, he became something infinitely more, despite Mrs. Oliphant. For in order to justify a fame lasting to this time, it is necessary that he should have served letters far better than in the mere construction of a clever scheme of incidents; there must have been something in his books of the air one breathes and the people one meets and knows. And this is so, for though he had not at any time the warmth of portrayal of his illustrious friend, he had the gift, strongly marked, of putting the traits and emotions, so well understood by the latter, into flesh and blood embodiments, of constructing characters who lived the story he had to tell, and who made a distinct atmosphere for it.

Of *Hide and Seek*, which appeared as early as 1854, Dickens himself wrote: "I think it far away the cleverest novel I have ever seen written by a new hand. It is in some respects masterly. Valentine Blythe is as original and as well done as anything can be. The scene where he shows his pictures is full of an admirable humor. Old Mat is admirably done. In short, I call it a very remarkable book and have been very much surprised by its great merit." But it was when *The Woman in*

White appeared a half dozen years later that the true genius of the man and the Dickensian influence upon him were both first made manifest. It is in the phrasing and lively delineation that one sees this rather than in similarity of character treatment, though there is a touch of Skimpole in the self-centred but gentlemanly Fairlie, a suggestion of Mantalini in the mannerisms of Fosco, and a composite photography of the older women in the books of Boz in Mrs. Vesey who "sat through life". The exquisite vein of satire running through the conception of Fairlie, whose lament is that "It is the grand misfortune of my life that nobody will leave me alone;" the magnificent contrast between grace, villainy, and humor in Fosco; the wonderfully speaking portraits of Marian Holcombe, Madame Fosco, and Mrs. Catherick, though all the work of Collins breathe in a measure the spirit of Dickens. Of the action in the book, the picture of Laura Fairlie, walking all in white, in the moonlight on the terrace, while Marian Holcombe is reading from a letter concerning Annie Catherick, "The Woman in White," to Walter Hartright; Fosco's postscript to Miss Holcombe's Diary; the great dialogue between Hartright and Mrs. Catherick, and the letter of Mrs. Catherick to Hartright have a dramatic fervor born of the power of combining plot and scenic coloring with a strong human sympathy.

Concerning this novel Dickens wrote to his friend: "I have read this book with great care and attention. There can be no doubt that it is a very great advance on all your former writing, and most especially in respect to tenderness. In character it is excellent. Mr. Fairlie is as good as the lawyer and the lawyer is as good as he. Mrs. Vesey and Miss Holcombe, in their different ways, equally meritorious. Sir Percival, also, is most skilfully drawn, though I doubt (you see what small points I come to) whether any man ever showed uneasiness by hand or foot without being forced by nature to show it in his face too." This letter must have grown out of consultations between the two during the making of the story, because, after it had been written, Dickens was appealed to for the name which would best advertise it to the world. As he was unable to suggest anything suitable, John Forster, the original of Mr. Pickwick, was

approached, but, though he was apt in the matter of titles, he could do nothing here. The little author was desperate, and one day started for Broadstairs with a determination not to return until a title had been found. For a long time he walked along the cliff and finally, as the sun went down, threw himself on the grass. He was facing the North Foreland Lighthouse, and half unconsciously began to apostrophize it in this way: "You are ugly and stiff and awkward, you know; as stiff and as weird as my white woman—white woman—woman in white—the title, by Jove!"

After this story had been published the author received a letter from a lady. She began by congratulating him somewhat coldly upon his success, and then said: "But, Mr. Collins, the great failure of your book is your villain. Your Count Fosco is a very poor one, and when next you want a character of that description, I trust that you will not disdain to come to me, I know a villain, and have one in my eye at this moment that would far eclipse anything that I have read in your books. Don't think that I am drawing upon my imagination. The man is alive and constantly under my gaze. *In fact he is my own husband.*" The lady was the wife of Bulwer Lytton!

This may have spurred him on to write *No Name*, appearing in 1862, in order to produce a better villain, and in Captain Wragge and Mrs. Le Count he certainly should have satisfied the most exacting critic. One sees in this volume the same fine literary spirit which characterizes its great predecessor, Dickens even thinking this the finer of the two stories. He had a high opinion of the character of Clare, but cautioned his friend, as he unfolded the tale in *Household Words*, not to tell it too severely. He suggested giving Pendril the lawyer touches of comicality, which, by the way, was not done, though there is a decided accession of humor here over the former novels, fine specimens of which are seen in Clare and Wragge. The latter is strongly suggestive of Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and the former is a clever study of the cynic, showing, however, marked traces of the satirical chapter on the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* which appeared five years before. Have even the best of Dickens's pages anything better

to show than this, where Collins's Clare says: "I have always maintained that the one important phenomenon presented by modern Society is the enormous prosperity of Fools. Show me an individual Fool, and I will show you an aggregate Society which gives that highly favored personage nine chances out of ten—and grudges the tenth to the wisest man in existence. Look where you will, in every high place there sits an Ass, settled beyond the reach of all the greatest intellects in this world to pull him down. Over our whole social system, complacent imbecility rules supreme—snuffs out the searching light of intelligence with total impunity—and hoots, owl-like in answer to every form of protest, 'See how well we all are in the dark!' One of these days that audacious assertion will be practically contradicted, and the whole rotten system of modern society will come down with a crash."

Collins opens *Armsdale*, published in 1866, with the character of Neal, which reminds one somewhat of the lines upon which Clare is drawn. It is in this story that he uses the suggestion of his literary mentor, which he passed over in *No Name*, imparting much Dickensian humor to the two lawyers—father and son—the Pedgrifts.

It was, however, in 1868, with the first issue of *The Moonstone*, that this fascinating author reached the pinnacle of his genius. The critics are undoubtedly right in affirming that this is the greatest thing he ever did. Not only in plot and character drawing does it excel, but the literary arrangement, the delicate touches and transitions in the realms of pathos and humor, entitle the book to a high and enduring place. It is here that one sees, more than anywhere else, the hand of Dickens. In fact, it might well be said that the pupil at this point graduated from his master's school by reason of this admirable piece of art.

One can never forget Mrs. Threadgall, the widow of a deceased Professor of Anatomy, who was constantly talking of her husband as if he were alive, although he had been dead for ten years; nor the good-natured and peppery (all in one) Doctor Canby; Sergeant Cuff with "a face as sharp as a hatchet" and "eye of a steely light-gray"; and Gabriel Betteredge, who

chucks the servant Nancy under the chin "when she looks nice." "It isn't immorality," he says, "it's only habit." These are reminiscent of Mrs. Wilfer, Mrs. Nickleby, Pickwick, Gabriel Varden, Bucket, Perker, Betsy Trotwood, and Wemmick. Then there is Miss Clack, with a Dickens name to begin with; she is Mrs. Jellaby and Miggs rolled into one. And one sees Pecksniff and Chadband in Godfrey Ablewhite.

The value of this work is the more remarkable when the circumstances under which it was written are considered, for it was composed, as was Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*, under the most distressing physical conditions. Collins had for some years suffered excruciating pain caused by rheumatic gout in the eyes, so greatly, indeed, as to make opium necessary to obtain relief. He says: "I was blind with pain and I lay on the couch writhing and groaning. In that state I dictated the greater part of *The Moonstone*."

Verily, it can well be understood what a boon it was for this tortured man to have the intimacy of the cheery, sympathetic Boz, and it might well be that it was in these moments of suffering that Dickens, out of his enthusiasm for administrative and social reform, as evidenced in *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit*, turned his friend's mind to the sufferings of others and imparted the influence which brought forth *Heart and Science*, showing the abuses of vivisection; *The New Magdalen*, pointing out the possibility of regenerating fallen woman; and *Man and Wife*, demonstrating the iniquity of the Scotch marriage laws.

Dickens died in 1870 and Collins in 1889, but it is of the living men that the lover of books now thinks. To him this rare and beautiful friendship will ever be alive in the works which both have left behind for the delectation of two worlds.

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